U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Belarus

Advancing Freedom and Democracy Reports - 2008
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Part 1

Belarus has an authoritarian regime that claims its legitimacy through fraudulent elections, nondemocratic referenda, and arbitrary decrees. Since his election in 1994 as the country's first president, Aleksandr Lukashenko has systematically undermined democratic institutions and consolidated power in the executive branch. Elections in 2006 that declared Lukashenko president for a third term and municipal elections in January 2007 again failed to meet basic international standards for democratic elections. Although several internationally recognized political prisoners were released in early 2008, arbitrary arrests, detentions, and imprisonment of citizens for political reasons continue. The government's human rights record remains very poor and has worsened in some areas. Politically motivated court trials are frequently conducted behind closed doors by a judiciary that lacks independence and issues seemingly predetermined verdicts. The government often seizes published materials from civil society activists and closes or limits the distribution of independent newspapers. The few remaining independent publications are often fined on the pretext of administrative infractions or through libel suits. State security services sometimes use unreasonable force to disperse peaceful protesters. NGOs, political parties, unions, and religious groups are subjected to fines, prosecution, eviction, and closure; their leaders are harassed and imprisoned. The regime's hostility to democracy and human rights, coupled with its near-monopoly over mass media, has created a prevailing climate of fear and repression. Many Belarusians, influenced by pervasive government propaganda, are wary of reform and the U.S. government's policy of promoting democratic institutions and a market economy.

Part 2

The U.S. government's principal foreign policy objective in Belarus is to promote the emergence of a democratic, peaceful, and prosperous country that respects human rights and the rule of law. As a result, the U.S. government supports and promotes robust programs that empower the country's people to determine their future and reform their state. Acting in cooperation with the European Union (EU) and other international partners, the U.S. government continues to monitor and take actions against officials responsible for human rights abuses, assaults on democracy, and state corruption, which the regime exploits to preserve its hold on power. In a country in which the government discourages academic freedom and independent thinking, the U.S. government supports the continued development of civil society, including independent media, human rights and democracy activists, prodemocracy political parties, legal support organizations, independent trade unions, and local entrepreneurs.

To counter anti-U.S. propaganda disseminated by government-controlled media, the United States engages society with public diplomacy and assistance programs that promote openness to democratic values, human rights, independent media, the rule of law, and a transparent election process. The United States also cooperates closely with the EU, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and neighboring countries to promote democracy and human rights through the coordinated release of press statements and other actions on specific human rights abuses committed by the regime. The United States continues to promote cooperation on nonproliferation, counterterrorism, and combating trafficking in persons.

Part 3

In 2007 the U.S. government increased existing sanctions on the regime and imposed new sanctions targeting government entities, as well as officials responsible for human rights abuses and repression. For example, in August 2007 the U.S. government, in consultation with the EU, expanded travel restrictions to include deputy ministers, the chief prosecutor and his deputies, Interior Ministry officials with a rank of lieutenant colonel or above, the head of the presidential administration and his deputies, election commission officials, the president of the Constitutional Court, and directors of state enterprises and their deputies. The restrictions also apply to spouses of these designated persons. In November 2007 the U.S. Government froze the assets of the state-owned petrochemical conglomerate Belneftekhim and its U.S. representative office, Belneftekhim USA.

The United States closely monitors and publicly condemns the government's persistent, calculated attacks on rallies and demonstrations, opposition political parties, civil society organizations, religious groups, and independent media outlets. U.S. officials demonstrate support for prodemocracy forces by attending or monitoring politically motivated trials of opposition members, independent journalists, and civil society activists. For example, U.S. officials observed the trials of the human rights NGO Vyasna, which the regime deregistered on politically motivated pretexts, and of "Novy Chas," an independent newspaper, which a government official sued for libel. U.S. assistance continues to provide legal and advocacy training and support for lawyers defending activists in such trials. In December 2007 President Bush met in the Oval Office with a delegation of local democratic opposition and civil society leaders. U.S. officials met with a separate delegation of opposition leaders earlier in 2007, and the ambassador and other U.S. officials meet regularly with opposition and civil society leaders.

In a coordinated effort with the EU, the United States has advocated for the release of all political prisoners. As of February 2008, authorities released five of six internationally recognized political prisoners. Former presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin remains in prison. The United States continues its policy to promote democracy by denying direct, nonhumanitarian assistance to government entities; limiting diplomatic engagement with government officials to the assistant secretary level or below; monitoring, reporting, and speaking out on abuses; supporting democracy and human rights programs; and facilitating educational and professional exchanges. The embassy's ability to perform these functions was severely limited by the government's demand in March 2008 that the embassy reduce the number of U.S. officials, which the government stated was imposed as a response to U.S. sanctions.

Part 4

U.S. assistance focuses on developing and strengthening prodemocracy parties and civil society groups, increasing access to alternative sources of information through the Internet, strengthening independent print and broadcast media, and building legal defense capacity and advocacy for the rule of law. In recent years, U.S. assistance has been provided to improve the organizational and technical capacity of prodemocracy opposition parties at the regional and national levels. The United States also provided assistance to more than 60 local NGOs for training in organizational development, advocacy, and rights education and protection. U.S. programs continue to support local independent media and NGOs that promote human rights, the rule of law, civic participation, gender equality, market reforms, and democratic institution-building.

More than 50 U.S. grants support independent newspapers and NGO Web sites that cover local news, rights protection, self-government, and other issues that promote democratic values and civic participation. U.S. programs support production and distribution of two documentaries on prodemocracy efforts by local activists and projects that commemorate victims of Stalinist oppression. The embassy also supported 14 human rights projects that included regional and local human rights initiatives serving activists requiring legal assistance and defense. In 2007 U.S. assistance supported approximately 400 seminars, lectures, and roundtables on legal issues and human rights, local self-government, civic participation, journalism, women's leadership, economic reforms, national history, and culture in the framework of democratic values.

U.S. assistance supported internal and external independent news organizations, which provided independent information via print publications, the Internet, and satellite radio. U.S. assistance also worked to broadcast satellite television into the country to counter the regime's information blockade. U.S. funding supports distance learning

for 900 local youths at the sole institution of independent higher learning in the country. U.S. funding also provides assistance to prodemocracy NGOs aimed at improving their organizational and technical capacity at the national and regional level. The training and funding encourages organizations to set long-term goals and formulate strategies for the future. U.S. assistance also supports efforts to reduce trafficking in persons, with a particular focus on women between the ages of 16 and 35 and, increasingly, men recruited for labor exploitation. U.S.-funded programs aim to increase awareness among risk groups and the general public about the problem of trafficking in persons, to improve job searching skills and vocational training, to facilitate the reintegration of more than 40 victims of trafficking, and to build the capacity of NGOs to improve victim identification and protection.

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